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Latin America
Weekly Review

15 December 1977

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LATIN AMERICA WEEKLY REVIEW

15 December 1977

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This publication is prepared for regional specialists in the Washington community by the Latin America Division, Office of Regional and Political Analysis, with occasional contributions from other offices within the National Foreign Assessment Center and from other agencies within the Intelligence Community. Comments and queries are welcome. They should be directed to the authors of the individual articles.

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Human Rights Developments

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Argentine President Videla has reportedly taken steps to eliminate excesses in the government's countersubversion program. He has transferred several officers who were involved in extortion or kidnaping. At the same time, the chief of the federal police has issued an order that there are to be no illegal arrests. Those arrested will be turned over to the courts; in no case is the prisoner to "disappear."

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The South American Military and the Return to Civilian Government

Recent speculation that Latin American politics are beginning a transition from military to civilian rule is premature. All of the military governments have been discussing liberalization policies and the possibility of returning to some sort of civilian government. Bolivia and Ecuador are leading the way and have announced plans to return to civilian rule next year. The problems they have encountered in the *retorno* process, however, are minuscule compared to those expected in the larger military-dominated countries. Indeed, we doubt that civilian rule without some military direction will soon be established in Ecuador or Bolivia, and we believe it highly unlikely that the military governments in the other South American countries will completely step aside in the foreseeable future.

The Military's Changing Perception

South American military governments have been fairly successful in restoring order to societies threatened by communism, anarchy, and chaos. Having for the most part won the battle on the streets, however, these governments are now coming under increasing domestic and foreign pressure to return their countries to constitutional rule. Thus, they are wrestling with a new type of political conflict that is both constitutional--how will chaos and confusion be prevented in the future--and personal--who will hold power and occupy the presidency? The answer to both questions still is: the military, in one guise or another.

During most of the early 20th century, Latin American military governments were transitional in that they would take over for a short while and then restore civilian rule. At least one observer of Latin American affairs has described this process as roughly equivalent to a two-party system in which the "ins" manage for a while and then are replaced by the fresher, unspoiled "outs."

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The reasons for military coups were generally: threats to the institutional existence of the army or cuts in the military budget; the personal ambition of a military leader; a call for the removal of an unpopular government; or an appeal from conservative interests for protection against a leftist government. Most such regimes returned the government to civilian rule when it became obvious that the military could not solve the problems or when serious splits, threatening the integrity of the military institution itself, developed over one question or another.

In the past 15 years, however, there has been a change in the military's perception of itself that has altered the future political development of the continent. The military has now proved in many countries, at least to its own satisfaction, that it is the only institution capable of providing the order and management necessary in a period of social and economic upheaval. In fact, a genuine concern for the social and economic well-being of the populace has characterized the military intrusion into civilian affairs in much of Latin American today. Most military governments now see themselves not only as defenders, but as developers of the nation and, despite some disclaimers, are reluctant to give up this new role.

If the world economic situation worsens in the near future, the military will be even more convinced that it is the only organization capable of maintaining economic growth while keeping order. For example, no civilian government would have the political courage or clout to enforce the austerity measures now being implemented in Chile. In Peru, even the military is having difficulty enforcing the austerity necessary to secure International Monetary Fund and other emergency assistance.

New Forms of Government

Given the military's changed perception of its role, the salient issue becomes what form the post-coup government should take. For example, should military rule be institutionalized in some manner, possibly by coopting a political party, or by allowing presidential candidates only from the military, or even by establishing a military gray eminence behind a civilian facade? At its extreme, the question is whether all vestiges of civilian government should be removed and a new form created.

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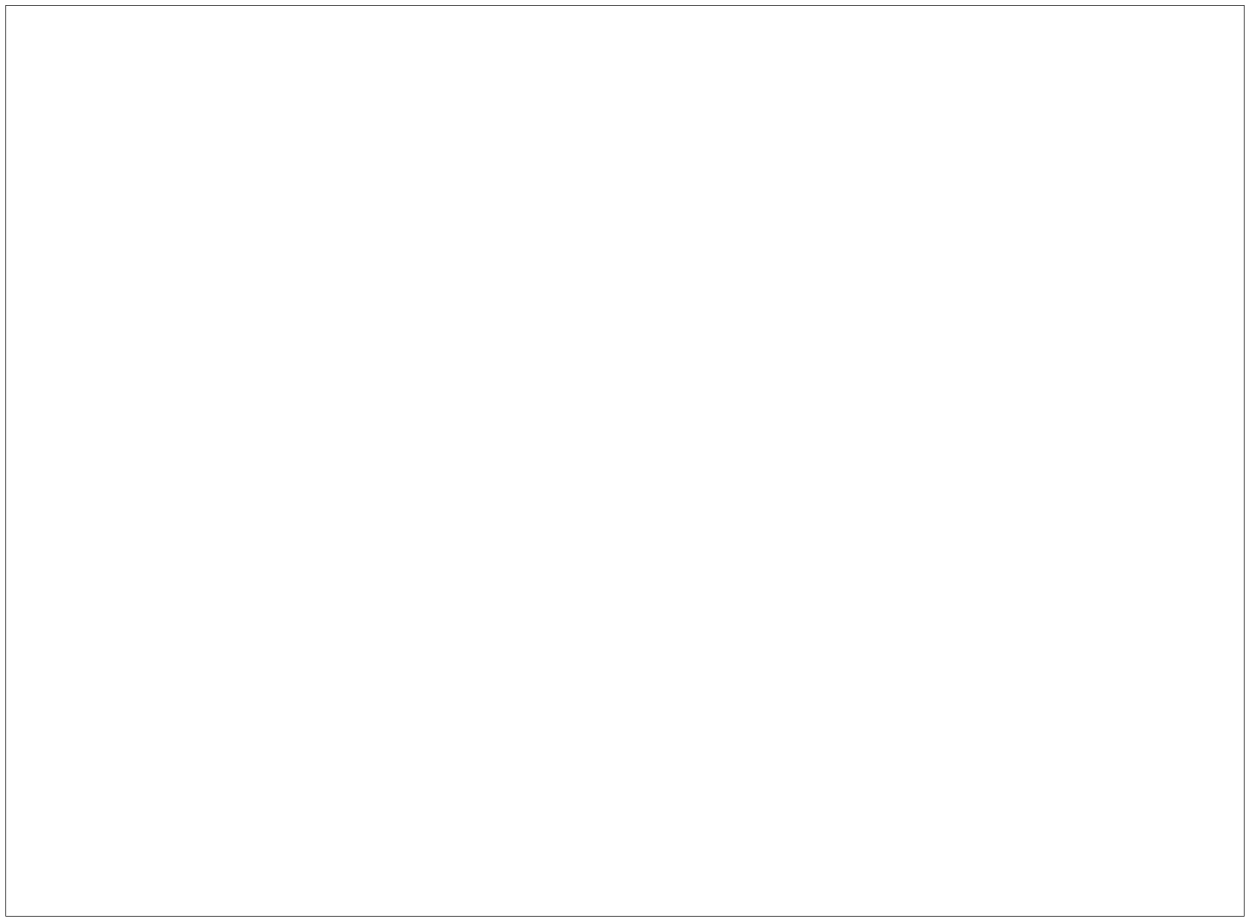
Many Latin American military men apparently would choose the latter option. Most distrust civilian politicians and want to make sure that they are not returned to power. The ebullience of post-coup nationalism soon gives way, however, to the reality of retaining at least some popular support or toleration, maintaining law and order, and fostering economic growth by solving problems that have long defied solution.

The more politically sophisticated military men of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Peru apparently are still mostly convinced that they can do the job and that the political situations in their countries demand new methods and institutions. There is, as might be expected, some disagreement within the various military institutions, and all except Argentina and Brazil have announced a timetable to return to civilian rule "sometime" in the future. This appears to be mostly a ploy, however, designed to deflect domestic and foreign criticism.



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The Other Military Regimes

The Bolivian and Ecuadorean experiences certainly have been noted by the other countries under military regimes. Military rulers, who are well aware that compliance with the US human rights policy includes at least some homage to the idea of democratic government, are likely to continue to talk of *retorno* and democracy, but to do little about them.

In *Argentina*, the armed forces are convinced that their intervention was the only possible way to stem the deterioration caused by civilian mismanagement, corruption, and complacency--and they are probably correct. A continuation of ineffective civilian government processes did not offer an acceptable future for the country, while a real national reorganization under the auspices of the armed forces offered an attractive alternative.

Since their takeover, the generals have made demonstrable progress against the twin problems--leftist terrorism and economic disorder--they had singled out for priority treatment. President Videla has maintained all along that the armed forces will retain power until the economy has been revitalized and the terrorists eliminated. He says that the successor government--the National Reorganization Movement--envisages a republican, representative, and federal democracy "adequate to reality and to the demands of the Argentine people." There is no question, however, that the achievement of this goal will take a long time.

Argentine President Videla

Chilean President Pinochet has announced a return to civilian rule in the mid-1980s. In the meantime, he has been institutionalizing the role of the military in the government by developing constitutional acts providing a legal foundation for military rule. The Chilean

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leaders have made it clear that the government will not be reorganized until after the economic situation improves, and then only under terms dictated by the armed forces. President Pinochet has said that the "creation of a new democracy will take a long time because each idea must be thoroughly reviewed."

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The Governments of the Future

The unsavory aspects of military dictatorship notwithstanding, the Latin American military stands out as the only traditional institution with the discipline, power, and ability to impose an orderly governmental system on the volatile societies of South America. The armed

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forces are unlikely to resume their traditional role as guarantors of the constitution and return the responsibility of governing back to the civilians.

Instead, what we are likely to see during the next several years will be an attempt by the South American military governments to secure more domestic popular support or toleration and more international political legitimacy. This will be achieved by encouraging civilians to speak with the military rulers and by granting more of the freedoms that are normal under constitutional rule. In addition, presidents designated by the military governments may run for "election" as civilians, thus acquiring more legitimacy for the regime. Whatever method is chosen, however, the military is likely to remain the power behind the scenes for the foreseeable future.

The move toward civilian government will continue to be discussed, but in actuality it will be a slow evolutionary process because the military will continue to distrust civilian politicians and to believe that progress can only be achieved through order--as defined by them. Moreover, should strong differences develop within the military over the pace of the *retorno*, a new generation of officers determined to avoid the same mistakes as their predecessors will take power through a coup. Then, the whole process will have to begin all over again.

For the time being, therefore, the southern continent seems to have made its choice and is apparently content to live with it. As the distinguished Latin American statesman, Alberto Lleras Camargo, once observed, "Latin Americans get, by and large, the regimes they deserve and tolerate." [redacted] 3.5(c)

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